
Faith and Order: One Century of Ecumenical World Conferences

I have argued elsewhere that “throughout the 20th century, no other movement or institution embodied with comparable longevity and persistence the service of theology to the search for Christian unity as the 1910 movement on Faith and Order and its successor after 1948, the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order.”¹ This article² offers an introductory overview of six international Faith and Order conferences – five of them called “world conferences” – which played a crucial theological role in the ecumenical advance that marked the 20th century³.

I. An ecumenical movement is born

The most effective impulses to the emergence of the 20th century search for Christian unity came from the ambivalent missionary encounter between Euro-American Christianity and other cultures and faiths in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. “Already the mission field is impatiently revolting from the divisions of the Western Church”, noted an ecumenical report issued in 1927, “to make bold adventure for unity in its own right”⁴. The ecumenical movement called “Faith and Order”, launched in 1910, was no exception as the life of one of its pioneers, the Episcopalian Charles Henry Brent (1862-1929), illustrates so well.

It was halfway through his years as missionary bishop in the Philippines (1902 to 1917) that Brent had the vision – “first conceived at an early Eucharist”, he would recall years later - of a world conference on matters related to doctrine and church life. His biographer, Alexander Zabriskie, notes that “his work in the Philippines increased his ability to penetrate behind differences, his

¹ O. Pedroso Mateus, “Ecumenical Theology”, in R. Muers & A. Cocksworth (eds), *Ford’s The Modern Theologians*, Hoboken, Wiley, 2024.

² This is a revised and enlarged version of “A Century of World Conferences on Faith and Order”, *The Ecumenical Review*, (75.2), April 2023, 154-171.

³ Readers have free online access to most of the documents quoted in this article at the Faith and Order Papers Digital Collection, archive.org/details/faithandorderpapersdigitaledition?sort=publicdate. Hereafter: F&O Digital, followed by the ID number of the document.

⁴ H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*, New York, G. H. Doran, 1927, 461. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

appreciation of the value of divergent views and practices, and his understanding of the difficulties in the ways of reunion”⁵.

“I was converted”, Brent wrote in his diary about his participation in the 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference. He went on: “I learned that something was working that was not of man in that conference; that the Spirit of God... was preparing a new era in the history of Christianity”⁶. What kind of new era? That in which “God was trying to give a united Church to men”. Brent’s calling was “to persuade men” to work through theological conference so that the divided churches would receive the gift of the One Church and make it visible.

In the age of global colonialism, northern internationalism and the US rise as global player, the US Protestant Episcopal Church embraced Brent’s vision in October 1910 and invited “all Christian bodies throughout the world which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour” to a conference “for the consideration of questions pertaining to the Faith and Order of the Church of Christ...”⁷ The hope was that theological conferencing on inherited controversial issues would pave the way for the emergence of a united church. An ecumenical movement was born under the leadership of Anglicanism and its vision of Christian unity built on what came to be known as Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: Scriptures; the Nicene and Apostolic creeds; the sacraments of baptism and holy communion; and the episcopal government of the church.

Bishop Brent and his colleagues of the house of clergy had the vision of a world conference on Faith and Order. But its driving force was an Episcopalian lawyer, Robert Gardiner (1855-1924). Appointed secretary of the Joint Commission in charge of preparing the Conference, Gardiner worked tirelessly from 1910 until his death in 1924, three years before the world conference was held in Lausanne, Switzerland. As a result of his colossal work, the small town in Maine bearing his family name, Gardiner, became what his biographer, John Woolverton, would later call the “improbable center of a worldwide movement”; and its post office facilities had to be rebuilt and enlarged due to the volume of correspondence and printed material (Woolverton 197). The New York Times of January 30, 1916, featured the Faith and Order Secretary as the “wielder of the largest religious correspondence that one man has ever conducted in America.”⁸

⁵ A. C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent: Crusader for Christian Unity*, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1948, 144-145.

⁶ A. C. Zabriskie, *Bishop Brent...*, 149.

⁷ F&O Digital: wcfops1.001.

⁸ John F. Woolverton, *Robert H. Gardiner and the Reunification of Worldwide Christianity in the Progressive Era*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005, 197.

It took Brent, Gardiner and their friends nine years of intensive correspondence and visits to Reformation and Orthodox churches in Europe and the Middle East, as well as to the Vatican, to reach the point in which a preliminary meeting to the future world conference would be convened. The meeting took place in August 1920, in Geneva, the emerging capital of internationalism⁹. By that time, some 70 Faith and Order national groups had already been created.

The list of participants included 137 people from forty countries, representing, most of them officially, some seventy autonomous denominations or churches. But in those days, this was no evidence of diversity. Almost half of them had come from the British islands and the United States, while sixty-three were from continental Europe. English was by far the dominant mother tongue. One participant was a woman. Two thirds belonged to Reformation churches; twenty to the Anglican communion; twenty-three were Orthodox, and four were Old Catholics. Only one third were lay.

The agenda of the preliminary meeting had three sections. In the first, participants presented their church traditions and their vision of Christian unity. The second and third sections focused on two themes, which were dear to the many Anglicans, who had just arrived from the 1920 Lambeth Conference. They were “The Meaning of the Church and What We mean by Unity” and “The Place of the Bible and a Creed in Relation to Reunion”. Following oral presentations carefully summarised by Robert Gardiner, lively discussions on the two topics often opposed, in a schematic view, Anglicans led by the renowned bishop and theologian Charles Gore, and Protestant Evangelicals, in a sort of international re-enacting of what was known in Britain as the problem of “Home Reunion”.

According to Herbert Newell Bate, Gardiner’s successor in the secretariat of the movement, the Geneva discussions showed first that “fruitful Conference in a mixed body of Protestants and Catholics was not impossible”, in other words, that ecumenical dialogue involving representatives of conflicting ecclesiological traditions was indeed possible. Second, that “much organised study must now be undertaken” so that the ultimate Conference “might be focussed upon clear issues” (Proceedings, x).

I would add a third result. The preliminary meeting stated clearly the goal of the ecumenical movement on Faith and Order. Our vision, Bishop Charles Brent noted at the opening session, “is that

⁹ Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920*, Gardiner, USA, 1920, F&O paper 33. F&O Digital: wccfops1.040; see also O. Pedroso Mateus, “Faith and Order 1920: the Life and Times of a World Conference”, academia.edu.

of an outward and evident unity of the Church of God”¹⁰. The language of “outward and evident unity” meant that the goal was far beyond that of a global federation of churches coexisting more or less peacefully without addressing their inherited divisions of faith and church ministry and discipline. We are endeavouring, he went on speaking of the separated churches, “to bring into the common treasury of a Catholic Church the experience and knowledge which each has gathered locally and in isolation”¹¹. The goal, he would write one day after the end of the conference, is that of “a Church, on earth, among men, visibly and organically one”¹². The goal was visible organic union in reconciled confessional and cultural diversity.

II. Lausanne 1927

Towards the first world conference From August 3 to 21, 1927, more than 400 delegates from over 100 churches gathered in Lausanne, Switzerland, for the first world conference on Faith and Order. What had happened since the 1920 preliminary meeting?

Immediately after that meeting, the newly established Continuation Committee appointed a Subjects Committee, whose tasks were to promote preliminary inquiry on the main topics of Faith and Order and to prepare the agenda for the world conference. The Subjects committee sent out to some 70 Faith and Order groups around the world four series of questions: on faith and creedal faith; ministry; the nature of the church and its unity; and sacraments. Responses were analysed at two meetings held in 1923 and 1925 and statements were produced recording agreements and differences on those topics¹³ (F&O paper 46).

The idea was to use those statements as the starting point of the deliberations at the world conference. However, sustained criticism against the 1925 proposed agenda of the conference led the Continuation Committee to authorise their publication only as background resources rather than discussion starters that could suggest an agenda-driven conference. Thus, there was a limited reception at Lausanne 1927 of the theological work done in response to Geneva 1920 and in preparation for the world conference.

The Conference Seven subjects were on the agenda of Lausanne 1927: 1. the call to unity; 2. the church’s message to the

¹⁰ F&O Digital: wccfops1.040.

¹¹ Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity: Report of the Preliminary Meeting at Geneva, Switzerland August 12-20, 1920* (Gardiner, USA, 1920), 20, F&O Digital: wccfops1.040.

¹² Robert H. Gardiner, *A Pilgrimage toward Unity...*, 90, F&O Digital: wccfops1.040.

¹³ *Statements by the Subjects Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order*, Boston, Secretariat, 1926, F&O digital: wccfops1.056.

world: the gospel; 3. the nature of the church; 4. the church's common confession of faith; 5. the church's ministry; 6. the sacraments; and 7. the unity of Christendom and the relation thereto of existing churches. This sequence accomplishes a movement from faith, in the sense of what is believed (subjects 2 to 4) to order, in the sense of the ordering or the structuring or the constitution of the church (subjects 5 and 6) that corresponds to faith, and from faith and order to the reunion of the separated churches (subject 7).

This movement - from what is believed (faith) to the ministerial constitution of the church (order) and from there to the manifestation of the church's visible unity - shaped the programme of Lausanne 1927 in the following way: first, from August 4 to 6, daily plenaries were dedicated respectively to the faith subjects 2, 3 and 4 mentioned above. From Monday 8 to Wednesday 10, participants were assigned to three sections, one for each of the faith subjects, with the task of recording "the apparent level of fundamental agreements" and "the grave point of disagreements remaining"¹⁴. On August 11 the three sections presented their reports to plenary sessions. Seven working days had been dedicated to the "faith" subjects.

From August 12 to Monday August 15, a new round of morning plenaries, following the comparative pattern of the first series, addressed the remaining subjects 5 to 7 mentioned above. In the afternoon of the same days, participants were once again assigned to one of the sections dealing with the three "order" subjects. On August 17 and 18, subject sections 5 to 7 reported to plenaries. August 19 and 20 were dedicated to the plenary discussion of the second draft of all section reports. In practice, less than five working days had been dedicated to the "order" subjects.

Some of its Results The conference received "for transmission to the churches" seven short reports. In the first, "The Call to Unity"¹⁵ - the only one "unanimously adopted" -, participants stated that after the conference "we can never be the same again". Other five reports were received "without opposition". One of them, "The Church's Message to the World: The Gospel"¹⁶, was included as a statement of faith in the constitution of the Church of Christ in China late in 1927.

The Report of Section III bears a title that sounds familiar to ecumenical theologians interested in the work of Faith and Order

¹⁴ H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference – Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*, New York, G. H. Doran, 1927, 459. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

¹⁵ H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order...* 460-461. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

¹⁶ H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order...* 461-463. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

today: “The Nature of the Church”¹⁷. It summarises some agreements on an elementary ecclesiology. The Church is God’s “chosen instrument”, appointed “to witness” to the redeeming power of the Gospel. It is “the communion of believers” and, according to the New Testament, “the people of the New Covenant; the Body of Christ; and the Temple of God...”. As there is but one Christ, “there is and can be but one Church, holy, catholic, and apostolic”. The report goes on to mention six characteristics whereby the Church can be known. However, there was no agreement on “the extent and manner in which the Church thus described finds expression in the existing Churches” because participants did not agree on the nature of the Church visible and of the Church invisible; their relation to each other; who belongs to them; and consequently the significance of church division.

Orthodox Objections For the Orthodox delegates, the conference was trying to reach agreement on matters of faith and order on the basis of a minimum common denominator, which was unacceptable. The bases assumed for the foundation of the Reports, they stated, “are inconsistent with the principles of the Orthodox Church which we represent”. In their view, the reports on the church, the confession of faith, ministry and sacraments, were in fact verbal agreements that dissimulated real disagreements. They were the result of compromise between “conflicting ideas and meanings” that led to external agreements “on the letter alone”. In matters of faith and conscience, they added, “there is no room for compromise”. Two different meanings, they went on to argue, “cannot be covered by, and two different concepts cannot be deduced from, the same word of a generally agreed statement”. In the absence of “the totality of faith... there can be no *communio in sacris*”. Reunion can take place “only on the basis of the common faith and confession of the ancient, undivided Church of the seven Oecumenical Councils and of the first eight centuries”¹⁸.

III. Edinburgh 1937

Towards the second world conference At Lausanne 1927, Faith and Order became a global movement for the inter-confessional conferencing – what we call today multilateral dialogue - meant to assist the churches to fully manifest the One Church to the world. The conference elected a new Continuation Committee with 160 members, and a small Business Committee. Its most immediate tasks were to engage the churches to respond to the Lausanne reports and to discern the way forward in the search for visible unity.

¹⁷ H. N. Bate (ed.), *Faith and Order*... 463-466. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

¹⁸ H.N. Bate, *Faith and Order*... 382-386. F&O Digital: wccfops1.066.

Meeting in 1928 in Prague, then Czecho-Slovakia, the Continuation Committee appointed a Committee of Reference in charge of analysing the churches' responses to the world conference¹⁹. The following year, in Maloja, Switzerland, it established a Theological Committee, placed under the leadership of the Anglican Bishop A. C. Headlam of Gloucester, England, to which it would be referred "a small number of crucial questions (e.g. the meaning of grace, ordination, the episcopacy) ..."²⁰. The new theological committee undertook immediately a comprehensive systematic and historical study on the doctrine of grace. It was the first Faith and Order study. In the following years, it would address the Eucharist, ministry and sacraments in preparation for the second world conference.

A report on the churches' responses to the reports from Lausanne 1927 was presented to the 1930 Continuation Committee meeting, held in Mürren, Switzerland. The report notes, concerning the search for a common understanding of the Church, that "it becomes clear that this deeply important problem remains open for further enquiry, and indeed must be regarded as an obstacle which the patient pursuit of further mutual understanding can alone enable us to surmount"²¹. How premonitory!

Initial plans were discussed for the second world conference, considering the interpretation of churches' responses to the Lausanne reports. A general theme was proposed: "The Church in the Purpose of God"²². It was referred to the Reference Committee for report in 1931. The idea of a general heading, absent from Lausanne 1927, suggested the perception that different controversial issues could appear under a new promising light if approached from the perspective of a principle that presumably governed, subsumed them. The idea that this governing principle was the role of the Church in God's *oikonomia*, God's saving design, suggested that for the leadership of Faith and Order, "the ecumenical problem" was closely connected with the overcoming of what 19th century German theology since Schleiermacher had called the fundamental difference (*Grunddifferenz*) between a "Protestant" and a "Catholic" general conceptions or paradigms of Christian faith. The 1929 decision to launch a study on the theology of grace concurs with this insight. It will not come as a surprise that

¹⁹ *Records of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order*, Boston, Secretariat, 1928, 10-11, F&O Digital: wccfops1.069.

²⁰ *Records of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order*, 1929, Boston, Secretariat, 1929, 12, F&O Digital: wccfops1.071.

²¹ *Report on the Responses from the Churches to the Lausanne Reports*, Boston, Secretariat, 8-9, F&O Digital wccfops1.077.

²² *Records of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order 1930*, Boston, Secretariat, 1930. F&O Digital: wccfops1.074.

1950 Oliver Tomkin's book in preparation for the third world conference will be titled *The Church in the Purpose of God*...²³

However, the international financial crisis of the late 1920s took its toll on the movement. In the words of the treasurer's report to the 1931 Continuation Committee, meeting in Hoddesdon, England²⁴, "the surplus remaining from the gifts for the Lausanne Conference, on which we have been able to depend since 1927, is entirely exhausted" while regular income from member churches and other sources was year after year outweighed by growing expenses. The Continuation Committee cancelled its meetings planned for 1932 and 1933. The Geneva office, opened in 1930, was closed. Ralph Brown, the General Secretary, resigned early in 1933. The residence of the acting Secretary, Canon Leonard Hodgson, in Winchester, England, became the official address of the movement until 1948.

Faith and Order was not out of debt until 1934, when the Continuation Committee resumed in Hertenstein, Switzerland, its annual meetings. Times had changed and theological convergence within the movement was less evident. It was clear since the previous year that in continental Europe "great dissatisfaction" was felt with the report on the theology of grace²⁵. In Hertenstein, the draft of the programme for 1937 was "severely criticised"²⁶.

Different views on church division led to different visions of unity and how to move towards that goal. In the British context of separation between an established episcopal church and free churches influenced by the Protestant continental Reformation, Anglicans insisted that "home reunion" required agreement on ordained ministry. For continental Protestants, division – and therefore unity – was a matter of fundamental consensus on gospel and the Church. In North America, division and the search for unity were inseparable from what would later be called "non-theological factors" such as the churches' approach to slavery.

Criticism of the proposed programme of the second world conference and of the final report of the study on grace led to the establishment of two new commissions: one on "The Church of Christ and the Word of God" and the other on "The Church's Unity in Life and Worship". However, one year later, at Hindsgaul, Denmark²⁷, the Continuation Committee realised that "the time

²³ Oliver S. Tomkins, *The Church in the Purpose of God*, London, SCM Press, 1950. F&O Digital: wccfops2.003.

²⁴ *Records of the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order 1931*, Boston, Secretariat, 1931, 10, F&O Digital: wccfops1.076.

²⁵ World Conference on Faith and Order, *The Theology of Grace – Report of the Theological Committee*, Boston, Secretariat, 1931, F&O Digital: wccfops1.077.

²⁶ L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order*, London, SCM Press, 1938, 9, F&O Digital: wccfops1.117.

²⁷ *The 1935 Meeting of the Continuation Committee*, Winchester, Committee, 1935, F&O Digital wccfops1.084.

was not yet ripe for a frontal attack on the problems presented by the doctrine of the church”. Instead of a conference focusing primarily on ecclesiology, as suggested six years earlier by the general theme “The Church in the Purpose of God”, “consideration should be given in parallel, as it were, to the four subjects which experience had shown to be felt in different parts of the world to be the most vital obstacles to Christian unity”²⁸.

The Conference and some of its results Like Lausanne 1927, Edinburgh 1937 opened on August 3. Lausanne ended 18 days later, while Edinburgh lasted for 15 days. Attendees at the first world conference were 406. At the second, they were 443, out of which 95 had participated at the first. Churches represented at Lausanne were 108. They were now 123 at Edinburgh. Unlike Lausanne, Edinburgh was theologically prepared by the work of four study groups: The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ; The Church of Christ and the Word of God; The Church of Christ: Ministry and Sacraments; and finally, The Church’s Unity in Life and Worship.

Unlike Lausanne 1927, the second world conference did not dedicate its first days to plenary sessions in which different confessional voices addressed the same topic. From August 4 to 7 and 9 to 11, Edinburgh worked in four sections, each with its respective subsections, on the basis of the reports and other publications provided ahead of the conference by the four study groups. On August 13 and 14, plenary sessions discussed the first report of the four sections. Two days later, a draft report was submitted to the plenary for a new round of discussions. A new version was then submitted to the conference and finally approved on August 18, the closing day.

Unlike Lausanne 1927, when the report VII on the subject “The Unity of Christendom and the Relations thereto of Existing Churches” was not approved in plenary for transmission to the churches, Edinburgh adopted *nemine contradicente* a report in six chapters on: II. The Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ; III. The Church of Christ and the Word of God; IV. The Communion of Saints; V. The Church of Christ: Ministry and Sacraments; and VI. The Church’s Unity in Life and Worship. Tislington Tatlow wrote years later, about the report, that “the Edinburgh Conference marked a definite advance upon that held ten years earlier at Lausanne”²⁹.

²⁸ L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order...* 10, F&O Digital: wccfops1.117.

²⁹ Tislington Tatlow, “The World Conference on Faith and Order”, in Ruth Rouse & Stephen C. Neill (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, 432.

This becomes clear as one reviews its chapter VI, on unity³⁰. We make the experience of spiritual unity, the authors write in the introduction, because we hold “the fundamental faith” that the Church is one. Our goal is “to realise the ideal of the Church as one living body, worshipping and serving God in Christ, as the fulfilment of our Lord’s prayers and of our prayers”. The text goes on to describe different conceptions of unity such as cooperative action, intercommunion, corporate union, and to relate to each of them the elements of unity - such as faith or confession; non-sacramental worship; sacramental faith and practice; order; and polity – that each of them requires. The following section of the report reviews the “obstacles to church unity”. They are of two types: those restricted to faith and order and those **not** restricted to faith and order. There follows a long list, with detailed explanations, of ways in which we move towards “the unity we should seek”.

The last of the 17 ways in which churches could move towards unity was the formation of a council of churches³¹. A proposal for the unification of the movements on Life and Work and Faith and Order under the new roof of a World Council of Churches had been submitted to the conference by the Committee of the Thirty-Five, appointed by the two movements. It was based on the recognition that “they have common interests and purposes”³². During the deliberations, Bishop Headlam of Gloucester, head of the theological committee, voiced the opposition of some members of the conference to the proposal. I wish to record my opposition to the proposal for the creation of a World Council of Churches”, he stated. “If such a Council were to exist, and if it passed resolutions on public affairs, it might do a very considerable amount of harm.”³³ The proposal was finally approved after. In his *Memoirs*, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Visser ‘t Hooft, would note that after the decision to establish the WCC, Bishop Headlam had symptomatically written to his colleague Bishop Heckel, a prominent leader of the Church aligned with the Third Reich, that “we have not been successful in preventing the World Council...”³⁴

³⁰ L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order...* 250-269, F&O Digital: wccfops1.117.

³¹ O. Pedroso Mateus, “Thirty days that changed the ecumenical movement”, www.oikoumene.org/news/thirty-days-that-changed-the-ecumenical-movement, October 23, 2023.

³² L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order...* 198, F&O Digital: wccfops1.117.

³³ L. Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order...* 151, F&O Digital: wccfops1.117.

³⁴ W.A. Visser ‘t Hooft, *Memoirs*, Geneva, WCC, 1973, 83.

IV. Lund 1952

Towards the third world conference Major disruptions were a regular feature of the work of the movement for a world conferences on faith and order. World War I delayed significantly the holding of the Geneva 1920 preliminary meeting. The economic crisis of the late 1920s had an important impact on operation of the movement and on the implementation of the view that ecumenical theology was ultimately about a fundamental difference between a “catholic” and a “protestant” conception of the more active or more passive role of the Church in God’s saving design for the world. Launched as early as 1937, preparations for the third world conference were no exception to regular disruptions as World War II broke out in their early stages. The fact that after Lausanne 1927 the movement had operated through two sections, European and America, facilitated its adjustment to the new adverse circumstances.

The Continuation Committee meeting held at Clarens, near Montreux, Switzerland, in 1938, appointed a group in charge of a study on “The Church”³⁵. The American section was asked to cooperate with the study group. In August of 1939, again in Clarens (the new “improbable centre of a world movement” ...), the Continuation Committee established two new study groups: one on Intercommunion, a second on Ways of Worship³⁶. The meeting was suddenly ended because of the deterioration of the political situation in Europe and the imminence of the war.

During the war years, the American section was providentially able to take upon itself the studies on the Church and on Intercommunion. Regarding the first, the original plan included the publication, ahead of the third world conference, of four volumes, two of them on the biblical doctrine of the Church and its historical developments. The final report was completed in 1945³⁷. The second study took a practical and empirical outlook. A questionnaire on churches’ practices related to Holy Communion and the conditions of admission for members of other denominations was circulated among American church leaders and served as the basis for the study³⁸. A similar procedure was adopted in Europe by the general secretariat of the movement albeit in a smaller scale. Immediately after WWII, the European section began to implement the plans approved in 1939 for the studies on

³⁵ *The 1938 Meeting of the Continuation Committee*, Oxford, The Committee, 1938, 28-37, 50; F&O Digital: wccfops1.104.

³⁶ *The 1939 Meeting of the Continuation Committee*, Oxford, 1939, The Committee, 1939, 13-22, F&O Digital: wccfops1.105.

³⁷ *The Nature of the Church: A Report of the American Theological Committee of the Continuation Committee, World Conference on Faith and Order*, Chicago, Willet, Clark & Co, 1945, F&O Digital wccfops1.113.

³⁸ *Report of the American Section of the Commission on Intercommunion*, Washington (Conn.), Office of the Associate Secretary, 1942, F&O Digital wccfops1.111.

the Church³⁹ and Ways of Worship⁴⁰, and for the following stage of the study on Intercommunion⁴¹.

The three reports and three volumes of essays resulting from the work of the two regional sections constituted the theological basis of the discussions and deliberations of the third world conference. It may be gathered from the very important material which is laid before this conference, argued Archbishop Brilioth of Uppsala at the opening session of the conference, “that the problems of Faith and Order have become more difficult, but at the same time more urgent than ever before.”⁴²

The conference and some of its results When the results of the studies on the nature of the Church, ways of worship and intercommunion were presented in Lund, the movement for a world conference on Faith and Order had ceased to exist four years earlier and had been succeeded by the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order, a permanent think-tank of theologians increasingly sensitive to the need for doing ecumenical theology for divided churches facing modernity. The world had gone through a new world war; the foundations of the colonial system were shaking; the ecclesial landscape had changed, and the ecumenical movement had reached, with the establishment of the World Council of Churches, a new threshold that raised new theological challenges to Faith and Order.

225 delegates, 73 participants and 80 accredited visitors gathered in Lund, Sweden, from August 15 to 28, 1952. Delegates represented 114 churches in more than 40 countries. The first two working days of the conference, August 16 and 17, were dedicated to a sustained introduction to its work, made necessary not only by the 15 years separating it from the previous conference, but also by the radically different situation in which it was held, following WWII and the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The following five days were assigned primarily to the work of six sections: three of them had the same topic: the Church; section IV worked on Ways of Worship and section V on Intercommunion. The discussion, revision and final approval of the section reports took three - August 25, 26, 27 - of the four last days of the meeting. The existence of three sections on the study on ecclesiology means that more than half of the delegates to the conference worked extensively on that study.

³⁹ R. Newton Flew (ed.), *The Nature of the Church*, London, SCM, 1952, F&O Digital: wccfops2.240.

⁴⁰ *Ways of Worship*, London, SCM Press, 1951, F&O Digital: wccfops2.006.

⁴¹ D. Baillie & J. Marsh (eds), *Intercommunion*, London, SCM Press, 1952.

⁴² O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952*, London, SCM, 1953, 102, F&O Digital: wccfops1.121.

Lund 1952 responded in two ways to the churches' move from isolation to an imperfect fellowship expressed in the establishment of a World Council of Churches. First by calling the churches to relate to each other by what became known as the "Lund Principle", that means to "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately"⁴³. If by creating the World Council of Churches in 1948 they have covenanted with each other to stay together based on their unity in allegiance to Christ, this ought now to be made visible in the intensification of their common life.

Secondly, by moving beyond the ecumenical theological method of comparing the teachings of the different traditions on a controversial matter to identify commonalities and remaining divergences requiring further work. The covenant relationship expressed in the establishment of the World Council of Churches, Oliver Tomkins told participants on the second day of the conference, "brings us to the end of what I would call a *mere comparative ecclesiology*"⁴⁴. We have seen clearly, notes the conference in the first chapter of its report, "that we can make no real advance towards unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied". We need from now on "to penetrate behind our divisions to a deeper and richer understanding of the mystery of the God-given union of Christ with His Church"⁴⁵. We need increasingly to realise, it concluded, "that the separate histories of our Churches find their full meaning only if seen in the perspective of God's dealing with His *whole* people."⁴⁶

The first expression of the new way of doing ecumenical theology in the service of ecclesial fellowship was "Christ and His Church", the second chapter of the Lund Report⁴⁷. In a single voice, starting from the centre of faith rather than from its denominational or confessional peripheries, theologians representing different ecclesiological traditions noted that "many of our differences arise from a false antithesis between the Church's being in Christ and its mission in the world" and from a failure "to understand the Church in the light of Jesus Christ as God and man, and in the light of His death and resurrection". "Christ, through his Word and Spirit", they go on to state, "calls the Church from the world and sends it into the world". Through this double movement, He builds the Church as "the living Temple of God". The Church in history, they

⁴³ O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lund August 15th to 28th, 1952* (London: SCM, 1953), 16.

⁴⁴ O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order...* 165.

⁴⁵ O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order...* 15.

⁴⁶ O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order* 15, 156-157.

⁴⁷ O.S. Tomkins (ed.), *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order* 17-20.

conclude, “is at once the congregation of sinners and the new creation”. One can see why the new method became known as “Christological method”.

V. Montreal 1963

Towards the fourth world conference

Four themes dominated the ecumenical theological work accomplished by the Commission on Faith and Order through its North American and European sections during the years that followed Lund 1952. They were reported to the Montreal 1963 world conference. The first was once again ecclesiology. While the American section proposed a christological ecclesiology of the church and its unity in the world⁴⁸, the European section combined more explicitly a christological and a Trinitarian approach to ecclesiology which included a systematic treatment of the church’s attributes, ministry, and mission⁴⁹.

The second theme, “Institutionalism”, was again ecclesiological, but this time breaking new ground as its ecumenical focus was the church as a human organisation, approached in an interdisciplinary way⁵⁰. It was the continuation of reflections on the role of non-doctrinal factors in church division and unity, launched in Edinburgh 1937 and pursued before and during the third world conference⁵¹.

“Tradition and traditions” was the third theme. The ancient Western polemic opposing Protestants and Roman Catholics in relation to sources of authority had been formulated in terms of a polarisation between the Reformation’s “Scripture first, tradition second” and the Roman Catholic post-Tridentine’s “Scripture and tradition”. In the Faith and Order study “Tradition and Traditions”, a third voice intervened at the outset: the Orthodox. The 1953 discussions on the launching of this study, held at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, were based on a short memorandum drafted by the renowned Russian Orthodox theologian Georges

⁴⁸ F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church* (Geneva, WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, 38), 7-34. See also P. Minear (ed.), *Faith and Order Findings: The Final Report of the Theological Commissions to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963* (London: 1963).

⁴⁹ F&O, *Report of the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church* (Geneva, WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, 38), 35-62. See also P. Minear (ed.), *Faith and Order Findings: The Final Report of the Theological Commissions to the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963* (London: 1963).

⁵⁰ *Institutionalism: Report of the Theological Commission for the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Geneva, WCC, 1963, F&O Digital: wccfops2.041. See also: N. Ehrstrom & W. Muelder (eds), *Institutionalism and Church Unity*, New York, Association Press, 1963.

⁵¹ C.H. Dodd, G.R. Cragg & J. Ellul, *Social and Cultural Factors in Church Divisions*, London, SCM Press, 1952, F&O Digital: wccfops2.010.

Florovsky⁵². “Christianity is essentially a historical religion”, he noted, and added that “the *kerygma* is preserved and propagated by a faithful and loyal *paradosis*”. As its title suggests, the study on “Tradition and Traditions”⁵³ applied the new Faith and Order method and consequently widened the topic in order to transcend the narrow polarisation of the Western divide.

The fourth theme was Ways of Worship. The work took the form of three enquiries on worship, in Europe, North America, and East Asia, although the East Asian section was never able to convene as such. The European study formulated theses on worship in relation to creation, redemption and new creation, and recommended further study on the discrepancies between worship and modern culture⁵⁴.

The conference and some of its results 522 participants, including 338 delegates, were in attendance. The 1963 world conference was far more culturally diverse than the previous ones, with 86 participants out of 489 coming from outside the usual “NATO” geography of Faith and Order. It was more ecclesially diverse with the very active participation of Orthodox theologians, who had been very few at Lund.

Montreal 1963 was the first world conference with the official participation of Roman Catholic observers and speakers. It is remembered by the July 16 debate opposing two outstanding New Testament scholars (Ernst Käsemann, Protestant, and Raymond Brown, Roman Catholic), the first rejecting, on historiographic grounds alone, the idea of “an unbroken unity of New Testament ecclesiology”⁵⁵ and the second affirming it.

Montreal took place concurrently with Vatican II, which was in itself an important moment of receptive ecumenism. The Catholic Council greeted the 1961 theological basis of the WCC in its 1964 decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*⁵⁶. In the same decree, it

⁵² F&O, Working Committee – Minutes of the Meeting held at the Château de Bossey, near Geneva 11th to 19th August 1953 (Geneva: WCC, 1953, F&O papers, series 2, no. 17) 31-33.

⁵³ F&O, Report on Tradition and Traditions (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 40).

⁵⁴ F&O, Report of the Theological Commission on Worship (Geneva: WCC, 1963, F&O paper series 2, no. 39), 7-25. See also W. Vos (ed.), *Worship and the Acts of God* (Nieuwendam: Studia Liturgica, 1963).

⁵⁵ E. Käsemann, “Unity and Multiplicity in the New Testament Doctrine of the Church”, *New Testament Questions of Today*, London, SCM Press, 1969, 252-259; D. M. Paton, “A Montreal Diary”, in P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 16-17.

⁵⁶ Council Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio*, para 1, 20,

https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

built on the imperfect communion of the WCC 1950 Toronto Statement's reference to the *vestigia ecclesiae*⁵⁷. It revised in 1963 the Tridentine ambivalent language about the *duplex fons* of revelation⁵⁸ in convergence with the Section II report of the 1963 Montreal conference "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions"⁵⁹. It described itself as the Church of Christ, in the 1965 constitution *Lumen gentium*, in terms of *subsistit in* rather than the polemic and post-Tridentine "*est*", a move that would ground ecclesologically the flourishing of ecumenical bilateral dialogues in the following decades⁶⁰. The Roman Catholic Church joined officially the Commission on Faith and Order in 1968, in a moment in which even the membership of the Roman Catholic Church in the World Council of Churches was the object of sustained discussions⁶¹.

Montreal 1963 worked in five sections: I. The Church in the Purpose of God; II. Scripture, Tradition and Traditions; III. The Redemptive Work of Christ and the Ministry of his Church; IV. Worship and the Oneness of Christ's Church; and V. "All in Each Place": The Process of Growing Together. It pursued – indeed radicalised – the post-Lund 1952 trend to widen the focus of ecumenical theology beyond the limits of the ecumenical agenda shaped by the requirements for Christian unity of the Anglican and Reformation churches, which undergirded the first two world conferences.

Each of those sections identified several themes for further study. The very ecclesiocentric Section I asked the churches a rather non-ecclesiocentric question: "How can a Church which tolerates the barriers which separate men today, whether east and west or black and white, face its Lord who has broken down the wall of partition?"⁶² It called for further study on the way the Lordship of Christ over the world is described; on creation and redemption in the context of secularisation; and on the place of the people of Israel in God's design in the ancient and the new covenant. Section

⁵⁷ Council Vatican II, *Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio*, para 3, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

⁵⁸ Council Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum*, para 7, 8, 10. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

⁵⁹ P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 50-61, para 39, 45, 50.

⁶⁰ Council Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium*, 8. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, accessed April 29, 2022.

⁶¹ J. Groottaers, *Rome et Genève à la croisée des chemins (1968-1972) : Un ordre du jour inachevé*, Paris-Genève, Cerf-WCC, 2005.

⁶² P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 44, § 16.

II, pursuing the work of the preparatory studies, fell short of overcoming the polarisation Scripture versus Tradition formulated by the theology of controversy by speaking of *sola traditione*. “Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit”⁶³. According to Section II, the reconciliation of the diversity of separated traditions within the Tradition required the ecumenical study of church history, “in an attempt to gain a new view of crucial epochs and events in church history, especially those in which discontinuity is evident.”⁶⁴

VI. Compostela 1993

The following world conference was held exactly 30 years after Montreal 1963. During those 30 years, in the absence of world conferences, Faith and Order wrote some of the most important pages of its history. The publication of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982 is but the most well known illustration of the fact that if until Lund 1952 the world conferences had the double role of organisational and theological governance, after Montreal 1963 this would no longer be the case. However, the fifth world conference gave clear evidence that its identity crisis was no measure of its ecumenical relevance.

Lost on the road to Compostela... The first proposal to hold a fifth world Conference on Faith and Order was made and approved in the same Commission meeting, held in Lima, Peru, which approved the convergence text *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*⁶⁵. The aims of the World Conference were then to review the process of reception of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* by the churches; and also to inter-relate and give impulse to the studies ‘Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today’ and ‘The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human community’. The WCC Central Committee in 1982 and the WCC 1983 assembly approved the proposal. The first meeting of the newly appointed Faith and Order Standing Commission, held in Crete, Greece, in 1984, produced a six-point plan. The world conference should be held in 1988 or early 1989. Concerning the venue, “it is appropriate to think of a location in the third world, in a country which has not yet been the site of any major WCC consultation or meeting”⁶⁶.

⁶³ P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 52, § 45.

⁶⁴ P.C. Rodger and L. Vischer (eds), *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order Montreal 1963* (New York: Association Press, 1964), 55, para 60.

⁶⁵ *Towards Visible Unity: Commission on Faith and Order, Lima 1982, Volume I*, Geneva, WCC, 1982, 14, 137-138, F&O Digital: wccfops2.119.

⁶⁶ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission*, Geneva, WCC, p. 53-57, F&O Digital: wccfops2.128.

However, when the new Faith and Order Plenary Commission met for the first time - in Stavanger, Norway, August 1985 – the winds of the world conference began to change direction. In the Report of the Secretariat, the new Director, Günther Gassmann, indicated that the World Conference should not take place before 1989. Enough time is needed, he wrote, “for our study programmes to achieve results which will permit the world conference to make a basic contribution to the present ecumenical situation and to other projects of the WCC, including the next assembly...”⁶⁷ The Plenary Commission issued a call to a world conference in 1989.

However, a world conference in 1989 proved unrealistic to the leadership of the WCC, whose calendar, in the years leading to the 1991 assembly, included no less than five global events, one of them being the global convocation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation to be held in Seoul, Korea, 1990. Faith and Order and the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism were asked to consider the possibility of holding “a single joint Conference on Unity and Mission in 1989”. The secretariats of the two commissions developed scenarios in that direction.

The Faith and Order Standing Commission concluded nevertheless that “at this time the purposes for which a Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order has been projected and authorised would not be well fulfilled either by a Faith and Order World Conference in 1989 or by a joint world conference on mission and unity.”⁶⁸

Back on the road to Compostela... The fifth world conference was back on the road to Compostela in the years following the Plenary Commission meeting in Budapest in 1989, when the Commission launched a new major focus and study on a common understanding of the Church⁶⁹.

In light of the ecumenical momentum created in the 1980s by dialogues on the understanding of the Church as communion, it was proposed that the theme of the world conference should be *koinonia* in faith, life and witness. In the words of the Standing Commission, meeting in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1990, the ecclesiological focus of the proposed theme corresponded to the Budapest decision to inter-relate ongoing and future studies “within the framework of a comprehensive study on ecumenical perspectives on the nature and mission of the Church.”⁷⁰ The

⁶⁷ Thomas F. Best (ed.), *Faith and Renewal*, Geneva, WCC, 1985, p.37.

⁶⁸ *Faith and Renewal*... p. 38, F&O Digital: wccfops2.138.

⁶⁹ Thomas F. Best (ed.), *Faith and Order 1985-1989: The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989*, Geneva, WCC, 1990, p. 201-219, F&O Digital: wccfops2.155.

⁷⁰ *Minutes of the Standing Commission 1990*, Geneva, WCC, 1990, p. 41, F&O Digital: wccfops2.159.

results of ongoing studies would then be taken up in the work of the Conference, which would help the ecumenical movement to broaden its scope in the 21st century.

The theological work done in the same year in preparation for a statement on unity to be submitted to the 1991 WCC Assembly pointed to the future direction not only of the study on ecclesiology but also of the thematic planning of the world conference. The final title of the statement adopted by the WCC assembly early in 1991 was “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling”⁷¹. The Standing Commission meetings held in Rome in 1991⁷², Dublin 1992⁷³ and Stuttgart 1993⁷⁴ advanced and completed preparations for the world conference. They included the publication of a second documentary history of Faith and Order⁷⁵, the publication of a substantial discussion paper⁷⁶ and the holding of seven regional consultations⁷⁷.

The conference and some of its results 412 registered participants gathered on August 4 to 13 in Compostela, Spain under the theme “Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness”⁷⁸. A little less than half of them, 198 more precisely, were official church delegates. The key word of the conference, the polysemic term *koinonia*, anchored a thematic structure in four sections: 1. The Understanding of koinonia and its implications; 2. Confessing the one faith to the glory of God; 3. Sharing a common life in Christ, and 4. Called to common witness for a renewed world. This thematic structure was conceived in order to harvest the fruits of the work accomplished in the 1980s; to address the ecumenical agenda defined by the 1961 WCC assembly statement on unity – visible unity requires agreement on faith, sacramental life, ministry, mission -, and finally, to discern future directions for Faith and Order.

⁷¹ M. Kinnamon (ed.), *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report 7th Assembly*, Geneva-Grand Rapids, WCC-Eerdmans, 1991, p. 172-174.

⁷² *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 1991*, Geneva, WCC, 1991, F&O Digital: wccfops2.164.

⁷³ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 1992*, Geneva, WCC, 1992, F&O Digital: wccfops2.165.

⁷⁴ *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 1993*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital: wccfops2.172.

⁷⁵ G. Gassmann (ed.), *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital: wccfops2.166; see also L. Vischer (ed.), *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement 1927-1963*, St. Louis, Missouri, The Bethany Press, 1963, F&O Digital: wccfops2.241.

⁷⁶ *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital: wccfops2.168.

⁷⁷ *Regional Consultations in Preparation for the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital: wccfops2.169.

⁷⁸ T. F. Best & G. Gassmann (eds), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, Geneva, WCC, 1994, F&O Digital: wccfops2.173; see also: *Message Section Reports Discussion Paper*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital: wccfops2.171.

During the first two days, the conference dedicated five of seven plenary sessions to the theme “Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness”. Work in four sections followed (on the understanding of koinonia and its implications; confessing the one faith to God’s glory; sharing a common life in Christ; and called to common witness for a renewed world) from August 6 to 9. During the final days, August 10 to 13, two plenaries addressed the future of the ecumenical movement, one reflected on the future of the WCC and the role of Faith and Order, and the remaining ones were dedicated to the message of the conference and to the section reports.

The conference adopted 78 recommendations, proposed by the four sections, addressed successively to the churches, to the WCC, and to Faith and Order⁷⁹. The latter are in general proposals for studies. Some examples: engage in “renewed studies on hermeneutics” and “new ways of doing theology”; make possible dialogue on “those issues which make fuller companionship difficult”; continue with the study on the community of women and men in the church”; seek to include Independent and Pentecostal churches as partners in dialogue; “...undertake a study on our different ecclesiologies; challenge churches to recognise the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople “as a central expression of the apostolic faith”; take up again the study on how the churches teach authoritatively today; start a study on a universal ministry of Christian unity; study the question of presidency at the Eucharist and of the ministry of oversight. The urgency of the hour, notes the report of Section IV, “demands a renewed Christian anthropology”. Several of these recommendations were implemented in the following years.

If Compostela had an impact on the Faith and Order study on ecclesiology launched five years earlier (I’m inclined to think that it was the other way round...), this was related to fact that it sought to hold together koinonia in faith, Christian life and in witness, which spoke in favour of describing the Church, - as did *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and its two predecessors⁸⁰ - as a sign and servant of God’s design “in and for the world”, echoing a certain convergence from the mid-1960s between the WCC (I’m thinking of the 1966 famous conference on Christians in the technical and social revolutions of our time⁸¹) and Vatican II, particularly its constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the modern world.

⁷⁹ *Message – Section Reports – Discussion Paper*, Geneva, WCC, 1993, F&O Digital wccfops2.171; see also *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 1994*, Geneva, WCC, 1994, p. 24-27; F&O Digital: wccfops2.174.

⁸⁰ *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Geneva, WCC, 2013, F&O Digital wccfops2.221; *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 1998, F&O Digital: wccfops2.188; *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Geneva, WCC, 2005, F&O Digital: wccfops2.205.

⁸¹ *World Conference on Church and Society – Geneva, July 12-26, 1966*, Geneva, WCC, 1967.

Conclusion: Towards Nicaea2025

Historia magistra vitae est. Seen in hindsight, the notion of Faith and Order “world conference” took rather different meanings at different periods of the Faith and Order history. Between 1910 and 1952, the term “world conference” designed at the same time an official self-governing theological movement for Christian unity and its main method of operation. The term “world conference” included the notions of organisational and theological governance.

Between 1952 and 1993, following the transformation of the movement into a commission of the World Council of Churches, “world conference” no longer meant an official self-governing movement, but theological leadership provided by three global conferences called for by the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order and organised along the official lines of WCC assemblies.

The growing identity crisis of post-1948 world conferences was successfully explored by the organisers of Compostela 1993, probably the last world conference organised in the model of a WCC assembly. The ups and downs on the road to the fifth world conference gave rise year after year to reflections on making relevant sense of a world conference. The programme of Compostela – whose structure reminds Visser ‘t Hooft’s 1957 *theology of the ecumenical interim*⁸², built in the WCC theological basis - managed to transcend the limits of the Faith and Order classical agenda and addressed theologically a good number of contemporary controversial issues. However, the event - with the usual exceptions that confirm the rule - did not manage to emancipate itself from the North-Atlantic ethos and geography that it has carried since its inception.

Historia docet. It is clear, on the way to Nicaea2025 – the first world conference that may not carry the name of its venue... - that, like Compostela, its ecumenical relevance is likely to be a function of the contemporary quality and significance of its content not only for Faith and Order itself but also, and perhaps primarily, for the churches, and in a special way for the churches that remain outside the shrinking geography of the search for living and witnessing locally in communion with the church universal. Is Faith and Order ecumenical theology intrinsically Eurocentric? Is post-colonial Christianity inevitably post-ecumenical?

A Faith and Order world conference on an event of the past is a contemporary ecumenical theological conference **related but not confined to** that event of the past, in other words, a world

⁸² W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft, *The Pressure of our Common Calling*, London, SCM Press, 1959.

conference that listens to the authoritative past in a radically different present with a view to a creative faithfulness to the past in the future. It is a world conference on confessing the apostolic faith in tomorrow's world.

This means, in the case of Nicaea2025, building on what Faith and Order has accomplished in the past in relation to conciliarity or synodality and in relation to growing in the common confession of the apostolic faith expressed in the ecumenical creed⁸³ and in other formulas with semantic equivalence⁸⁴. This means also to deepen and unpack the meaning of the theological basis of the WCC, which presupposes the “non-negotiable” christological and trinitarian legacies of Nicaea 325 and Constantinople 381. This means, thirdly, to encourage imagination – in relation to confirmation classes, Sunday sermons, youth ministries, ministerial formation etc – on proclaiming the ancient symbols within emerging, often “post-Christian” cultures.

⁸³ *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene Creed (381)*, Geneva, WCC, 1991, F&O Digital: wccfops2.160.

⁸⁴ Cf. the Faith and Order series “Confessing our Faith Around the World”, F&O Digital: wccfops2.111; wccfops2.127; wccfops2.130 and wccfops2.133.